



STATE OF WASHINGTON
WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
1102 SE Quince Street • PO Box 47990
Olympia, Washington 98504-7990

October 15, 2003

To: Yakima Health District Board Members
Yakima Valley Area School Board Members
State Board of Health Members

From: Vickie Ybarra, State Board of Health Children's Committee Chair

Re: **STATE BOARD OF HEALTH/ LOCAL HEALTH BOARD FORUMS ON
SCHOOL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION POLICIES AND
PRACTICES**

Overweight and Obesity --- America's Fastest Growing Cause of Illness and Death

On October 1, 2003, U. S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona reported to the Joint Economic Committee of the United States Congress that

Nearly 2 out of 3 of all Americans are overweight and obese; that's a 50% increase from just a decade ago. More than 300,000 Americans will die this year alone from heart disease, diabetes, and other illnesses related to overweight and obesity.

Obesity-related illness is the fastest-growing killer of Americans. The good news is that it's completely preventable through healthy eating — nutritious foods in appropriate amounts — and physical activity. The bad news is, Americans are not taking the steps needed to prevent obesity and its co- morbidities¹.

After steady increases for more than a decade, now more than half of all Washington residents are overweight or obese. (For height and weight specific definitions of the terms "overweight" and "obese", please refer to the attached Body Mass Index Table)

The proportion of children ages 6-19 who are overweight in America has tripled since 1980 - reaching 15%.

¹ Carmona, Richard H., M.D., M.P.H., F.A.C.S, Surgeon General, U.S. Public Health Service, Department of Health and Human Services; "Reshaping America's Health Care for the Future", Statement to the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, October 1, 2003.
http://www.kaisernetwork.org/health_cast/hcast_index.cfm?display=detail&hc=975

The Roles of Children, Families and Schools

It is clear that in the last analysis, choices individual children and families make about their diets and physical activity levels are their domain and their personal responsibility.

However, based on their review of relevant scientific literature, the Washington State Department of Health advises us that

Most American children fail to meet the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Over the past 20 years the proportion of foods eaten by children as part of school meals has declined while fast food consumption has increased.

Schools reinforce health education messages when they provide children with a variety of health promoting foods in an attractive environment, provide adequate time to eat school lunch and breakfast, adopt policies that limit access to less nutritious foods and beverages, and make it easy for staff and teachers to model healthy eating choices.

On the subject of children and physical activity, the Department of Health reports:

At the same time that rates of childhood obesity and diabetes have been increasing, participation in school-based physical education has been decreasing.

School-based physical education is an effective way to improve physical fitness. Some studies have also found decreased body fatness over time in children who participate in well-designed physical activity.

Schools, families and communities can work together to encourage active lifestyles. It is easier for children to be active when they are provided with effective physical education programs, safe and attractive play areas, sports facilities and equipment, developmentally appropriate non-competitive activities, high quality child care, good role models, and access to sidewalks and bike paths.

The State Board of Health's School Physical Activity and Nutrition Initiative

In July of this year, the state Board of Health established improvement in school-based physical activity and nutrition programs, policies and practices among its priority goals for the coming biennium. We are optimistic about achieving this goal because of the strong collaboration we have received from the state Department of Health through their Nutrition and Physical Activity Plan, from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction through their host of school physical activity and nutrition programs, from the University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition through their collection and dissemination of the science and best practices of school based programs, through active support from the Washington State Public Health Association, the Washington State Parents and Teachers Association, the Washington State School Directors Association, the Children's Alliance and many other groups.

We are also encouraged that the University of Washington's Health Policy Analysis Program is partnering with the UW Public Health Nutrition Program to host a "Safe Table" Forum later this fall where various members of the public health community, the food producing, processing and marketing industries, parents, teachers, and policy makers will be invited to engage in frank discussions about these important issues.

Today's meeting is our first attempt to share our work.

We believe that local public health and education leaders are as concerned as we are that childhood obesity is now reported as epidemic in our state and nation. More and more of us are learning that the statistics are frightening, and the consequences for our children's health and readiness to learn are both enormous. And judging by the mood of some state policy makers, the appetite for mandates and regulation may be growing. That's why we are so pleased that so many local health and education leaders chose to join us today to gain a clearer understanding of this problem and to begin the search for ways to address it at a local level.

This afternoon we plan to hear from leaders within Yakima area communities, from academics and from statewide experts about the facts and figures that led public health experts to call childhood obesity epidemic, about model efforts to address it at school and about public and private sector commitments already in place to turn this situation around.

Our goals for today are to:

1. Build broader and deeper awareness among community leaders and policy makers about childhood obesity,
2. Share best practices,
3. Make evidence based school nutrition and physical activity assessment tools, programs and policies widely available, and
4. Support interested school boards and local health jurisdictions to become community leaders on physical activity and nutrition.

If the afternoon is successful, it need not lead to some new statewide solution. We hope it will be the beginning of renewed local efforts to improve school and community strategies to teach healthy nutrition and exercise habits, to model them, and to improve our schools as a center from which children can take these messages and build them into their lives.

We are excited about this opportunity to meet with Yakima area health and education leaders, to learn what you are doing on this subject and to see what we can do to support your efforts to improve the health and educational achievement of all our children.